

Walter Bass

1916 - 1927

(From a letter to Rosabeam in 2005, when Walter was 92)

“ ... My mother was widowed by my father’s sudden death when I was a babe, 10 months of age, in November 1913. He was a well-known comedian (according to some old bill heads I still have) and died of a cerebral haemorrhage on his way to fulfil a theatre engagement in London. He was twenty years older than my mother and had grown-up children by his first wife. My mother bore him three daughters and me. Strange as it may seem, before his death he had visited Reedham to see the daughter of a family friend and he thought and said then, what a lovely school it was and how the Reedham country environment was something out of the ordinary.

In August, 1916, I entered Reedham without any anguish when my mother went home. I was used to staying in different temporary abodes because my mother used to go out and canvas votes from subscribers. Entry into Reedham was by selection through subscribers’ votes (each subscriber was entitled to one vote for each half-guinea they subscribed.) The parent or guardian of a candidate for entry into Reedham was given a list of subscribers and would have cards printed which listed the circumstances of the child in need: widowhood, no means of support, serious illness or impediment of the mother, etc. These cards were presented to subscribers to request their kind support in the elections for entry held ever six months.

As a child of three, notwithstanding that I was a robust boy, my mother curled my golden locks until I looked like Millais’ painting, “Bubbles”. I think she may have thought a widow with four children, one a child of three with a head of golden curls, may have had some appeal. We visited offices in the City which emitted an aura of wealth and well-being. The smell of cigar smoke was synoptic with the heavy gold watch-chains joining the waistcoat pockets. Sometimes we were invited to visit a house and stay the night. At all events I was selected to go to Reedham. My sister Winnie was already at Reedham a year earlier than me. I missed my youngest sister Dorothy but a girl of my age, Gwenne Owen, entered the babies with me and was so much like my sister that she grew on me. She shared all childish problems with me but she left Reedham at eight years of age because her mother remarried.

The babies home was in fact the headmaster’s residence, last used by Mr Carter¹, and was an abutment at the end of the terrace by the boys’ side and the hairpin bend of the drive. When Mr Clarke came he elected to move to married quarters in the centre of the main building where he lived with Mrs Clarke, the matron, and their daughter, Enid, who later became a qualified doctor. He told us later that he preferred to live centrally to meet any eventualities where instant availability was paramount. Even at the age of three and a half, I enjoyed the view westward of the setting sun and the tall

¹ James A. Carter was the headmaster from 1879 to 1908 and was succeeded by H.E. Clarke - DS

copper beech trees. Our meals were delivered from the school kitchen, but the premises sported roaring fires (no central heating) on which the children's nurses made toast with the aid of long forks. We had several air-raids by zeppelin and then we got under the kitchen table for safety. The nursemaids never panicked and made it all seem like fun. I remember seeing two zeppelins flying high during the daytime. One was later shot down over Streatham Common by an aeroplane - the pilot won the Victoria Cross - It was Royal Army Flying Corps in those days, before the RAF. My half-brother brought home some spoils of war; to my joy this was a German helmet, the internal padding had the name Sergeant Muller and beside the name was a large red-colour blob which I immediately thought was German blood! However, it was a brilliant red and it did not alter over the years so I think it must have been red ink.

After the war, Mr Wuille² unveiled the memorial plaque in the school chapel with thirty-nine names of Reedham old scholars who had given their lives in defending their country. Three of the masters had served in the forces during the war. There were few families that had not been bereaved by the loss of a male member and Reedham had a number of orphans whose fathers had been killed in the forces. My mother switched to factory work, like many of her friends, and one job she did was to use a lathe to turn 9.2" shells. She learned a lot of words not normally in women's vocabulary and often named tools about which I had not a clue until I grew older. At holiday times I used to go to my mother's work canteen. The factory was in Battersea and was called appropriately, "The Projectile". There was a great feeling of camaraderie among the "girls" who knew each other well before they worked at the Projectile. I did not like the tapioca or the greens and Swedes, but the girls often gave me some of the meagre sugar ration to satisfy the sweet tooth of a greedy boy!

² Dan Wuille was an old scholar, 1880-1891, and a member of the Reedham Board